Interview with

THE HON. JEAN AUGUSTINE
SECRETARY OF STATE, MULTICULTURALISM AND STATUS OF WOMEN



The Honourable Jean Augustine was born in Grenada. Before entering politics she was an Elementary School Principal with the Toronto District Catholic School Board. In 1993, Ms. Augustine became the first African Canadian woman elected to the Parliament of Canada. From 1994 to 1996 she was the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister of Canada. Ms. Augustine also served three terms as Chair of the National Liberal Women's Caucus. In February 2002, Jean Augustine was elected Chair of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade. On May 26, 2002 Jean Augustine was appointed Secretary of State (Multiculturalism)(Status of Women).

Can you describe your own immigration experience?

I immigrated to Canada 42 years ago to pursue a post-secondary education. The Canadian Domestic Scheme offered me the opportunity. I worked in the home of a Canadian family and subsequently obtained landed immigrant status in Canada.

Upon my arrival in Canada, I joined, formed and worked with community groups to eradicate racism and discrimination. I participated on the very first Canadian Multicultural Council.

I also served as a member of the board of several organizations, including the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women and the Urban Alliance on Race Relations. As national president of the Congress of Black Women, and as chair of the Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority, I worked to protect the human dignity of people of colour, the disadvantaged, women, and Aboriginal people.

Canada has afforded me every opportunity to realize my goals and pursue avenues that may not have been available to me in my home land.

How does the Multiculturalism Program and Policy fit with the work of Citizenship and Immigration?

The work that the Multiculturalism Program provides is closely linked with the work of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. Citizenship and Immigration is the initial point of contact for immigrants to Canada, helping them complete the formal process towards becoming new Canadians.

The Multiculturalism Program takes the process a step further by working to ensure that these new Canadians are able to participate fully in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the country. The Multiculturalism Policy, and more specifically, the Multiculturalism Program, which works towards achieving the objectives of the Policy, and Citizenship and Immigration, are there to ensure that the process of immigration and settlement in Canada is as smooth as possible. The work of the Multiculturalism Program is of ever-growing importance as the diversity of new Canadians is increasing, as illustrated by the 2001 Census.

The Multiculturalism Program and the Department of Citizenship and Immigration co-operate on a number of initiatives to this end. Canadian Heritage and the Department of Citizenship and Immigration are both partners of the Metropolis Project, an international research effort to study immigrant integration and the impact of immigrants on urban centers. Research is co-ordinated by four centers of excellence – in Montréal, Toronto, Edmonton, and Vancouver – each associated with major Canadian universities.

The Department of Citizenship and Immigration and the Multiculturalism Program play a key role with the recognition of foreign credentials. This is accomplished by supporting and engaging affected communities, and informing and influencing the policies of governments, the estimated 400 professional and trade associations, and regulatory bodies. Through the Voluntary Sector Initiative, a joint undertaking by the Government of Canada and the voluntary sector, the Multiculturalism Program is supporting two large multi-year projects that will strengthen linkages and policy development on the issue of recognition of foreign credentials. The breaking down of barriers towards the recognition of foreign credentials was a priority in the September 30, 2002, Speech from the Throne, and our Program will continue to work with Citizenship and Immigration towards this important end.

Can multiculturalism as a Canadian ideology and public ideal handle any level of diversity?

I feel that diversity is a complex and rich trait of Canadian life, so it is difficult to comprehend in terms of quantifiable «levels.»

Diversity and multiculturalism are not just ideology and public ideals; they are concrete realities experienced in the everyday lives of Canadians.

Canada was the first country in the world to adopt an official multiculturalism policy to reflect the cultural diversity of the Canadian people. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* enshrines our principles of equality and the importance of diversity as part of our identity. Through the Charter, we recognize that all Canadian men and women have the same rights, freedoms and responsibilities, regardless of their background or beliefs.

These legislative tools ensure that diversity is not only recognized as a prominent feature of public life in Canada but also as a shared value and as an element of the Canadian way of life. The Multiculturalism Program also supports this goal in promoting diversity, respect and connection among Canadians.

Martin Collacott and others have suggested that Canada's cities are on the edge of imploding under the weight of diversity. Do you agree?

Canada is now one of the world's most urban nations. According to the Prime Minister's Caucus Urban Task Force, four out of five Canadians currently live in large urban centres and there is every indication that this trend will continue.

Any city that aspires to greatness must be internationally competitive, and great cities have been more than just economic powers. They are centres that embrace growing diversity, creativity and innovation. All levels of government and sectors of society must make it a priority to strengthen and support diversity in both urban and rural Canada.

While our record in Canada is far from perfect, there is no evidence that any Canadian city is on the edge of «imploding under the weight of diversity.» In fact, Canadians' attitudes towards multiculturalism and the social values of inclusion and equality have been found to be quite positive. Rates of ethnic intermarriage, to take just one indicator, have been climbing steadily for decades.

A recent poll reveals that a majority of Canadians believe that government support of Canada's multicultural heritage promotes and helps solve the problems of racism and prejudice, encourages institutions of Canada to reflect and respect cultural diversity, and enhances the value of Canadian citizenship. (See Environics poll results presented in *Canadian Issues* (February 2002), pp. 4-5.)

Canada has learned a great deal from its ongoing efforts to build an inclusive society. Our growing and changing diversity is making our country a better place.

How can Toronto and Vancouver handle the developing cultures of violence they appear to be facing?

As two of the largest and most diverse cities in Canada, Toronto and Vancouver are faced with both challenges and opportunities resulting from that context. Sadly, in past years, particular events in these cities have drawn attention to some of the challenges which are often associated in the media with ethnoracial or immigrant communities.

I feel it is important to keep in mind that urban violence is a complex phenomenon that is often rooted in poverty and marginalization, and which raises the more general issue of social inequality within our societies. So the answer to your question lies in what we can do, as a society, to address this particular challenge.

From the standpoint of the Government of Canada, responding to such issues is a priority. The 2002 Speech from the Throne outlines the efforts our Government has and will continue to commit to, with regards to helping children and families out of poverty and to helping build healthy communities.

Within the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Multiculturalism Program also serves to promote full and active citizenship and equality of access for all Canadians. For example, the Multiculturalism Program is currently involved with different initiatives to build and strengthen partnerships with local institutions, community groups and educational organizations, and strengthen our partnerships with other levels of government so that we can work together to address the issues facing our communities.

The Program supports various projects throughout the country. For example, in November 2002, I announced a multi-year project in collaboration with the Saskatoon Police Service, to make major internal transitions and to improve its community relations. The changes will focus on cultural sensitivity, inclusive hiring practices and community input – all designed to deliver a more culturally aware, community-based police service to the citizens of Saskatoon.

Another example is in Vancouver, where one of our program officers is an ex-officio member of the Vancouver Police Services' Diversity Committee.

Did hate and bias activity after 9/11 demonstrate a capacity to handle tension?

Fortunately, the Government of Canada and a wide swath of Canadians were already actively engaged in a dialogue on diversity, and issues arising from it, prior to

September 11th. Consequently, the ability of the Government of Canada to respond on many levels (legislative, outreach and through contact with Canadians) to post-September 11th tension was far greater than it would otherwise have been. On the security front, legislation had already been introduced or was under development. The widespread consultations in preparation for the United Nations World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), the active engagement of many communities in the Metropolis Project, and the consultations on the proposed Immigration and Refugee Protection Act meant that the Government of Canada had open lines of communication with many minority communities across the country.

Post-September 11th, Canadians, their communities and their governments, have lessons to be learned that will guide future actions and allow society to handle future crises; for example, knowledge gaps need to be addressed. However, no domestic crises emerged that indicated any fundamental failures in «the Canadian diversity model.»

In the post 9/11 world, religion has returned to the fore as an important aspect of diversity. Indeed, religion was also highlighted at the WCAR. What is our government doing to ensure that policy-makers, practitioners, and the public have a better understanding of both our religious diversity and the issues that arise from it?

For some Canadians, religion is an integral part of their identity, whereas others may not identify with one specific religion or faith. In this way, religion, in its institutional form, and spirituality contribute to the richness and texture of Canadian identity.

Recent events on the international stage, such as the 9/11 tragedy and the rise of political forms of religion in several countries, have led to renewed public interest in religion and faith as a relevant social element.

In Canada, our Charter of Rights and Freedoms contributes to the elimination of discrimination based on religious affiliation. But we need to continue our efforts to both promote understanding across cultural and religious groups in Canada and combat hate and bias activities that often target religious groups.

The Multiculturalism Program as well as its partners, including the Metropolis network, are working to provide the conditions for enhanced public dialogue on religion and cultural diversity. Supporting interfaith dialogue, institutional flexibility with regards to accommodating religious practices and beliefs, as well as research and public education in these areas will be important tools in achieving this goal.

It has been suggested that the best way to effect change is to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in decision-making bodies. The Government of Canada tracks the progress of women in the political process; does it track the progress of minorities and newcomers?

Much of the information we collect as a government, on minorities and newcomers to Canada, is factual data. For example, Statistics Canada has recently released its data on ethnic origin, place of birth, and visible minorities, which are of great importance in designing public programs and policies to reflect the reality of the Canadian population.

But, qualitative information on how minority groups and newcomers to Canada experience and contribute to public life and the decision-making process is somewhat lacking to date. This issue has been raised in a number of forms in recent years, such as the 2002 «Bringing Worlds Together» Seminar on the political participation of women, minorities and newcomers to Canada.

This is one of the reasons why the Department of Canadian Heritage, in partnership with Statistics Canada, has developed a nation-wide survey called the Ethnic Diversity Survey. We will have the survey results in the summer of 2003.

The Ethnic Diversity Survey is the first large-scale survey in Canada to offer ground-breaking research in areas such as ethnic self definition, family background and interaction, knowledge and use of languages, social networks, civic participation, social exclusion, belonging, trust and satisfaction, and socio-economic activities. This survey will help us better understand how Canadians of all backgrounds, including newcomers and minorities, experience ethnicity in relation to Canadian life.

Public attitudes and the media play a powerful role in shaping the public perception of diversity and immigration in Canada. What does the Government of Canada do to ensure that a balanced message reaches all Canadians?

Canada is viewed by Canadians, and by the world, as a diverse and welcoming society, and is considered at the international level as a model of respect and tolerance.

Recent surveys have shown that Canadians are increasingly aware of Canada's Multicultural Policy and that the majority approve of it. (Canada was the first country in the world to adopt an official Multiculturalism Policy). Respondents feel that multiculturalism has a positive impact on our society, and fosters a greater understanding between groups and people of all backgrounds, cultures and religions.

However, we know that there is still a gap between the values of the Multiculturalism Policy and the experience that many Canadians live. Our goal is to achieve an inclusive society where diversity is embraced by all and to ensure that Canadians from all backgrounds and beliefs have equal opportunities.

In the years to come, we will concentrate our efforts on four principle areas of concern: the problem of systemic discrimination and racism; developing cross-cultural understanding; promoting shared-citizenship; and the under-representation of the diverse population in Canadian institutions.

In essence, this cannot be done alone; we must engage other federal government departments, as well as other levels of government to develop short, medium and long-term strategies for greater cross-cultural understanding. Working towards this desired state of shared citizenship, and the elimination of racism and discrimination, will ensure our future generations can be the benefactors of a world that is more accepting and understanding of its ever-increasing diverse population.